

I used to love the TV spy show *Alias*. I was hooked from the very first scene. The series lasted six years and the opening frame of the first episode was an abstract close-up of something the viewer couldn't quite make out until suddenly we see a woman's face, surrounded by a shock of red-Kool Aide colored hair plunge into the scene. She's being held underwater and is struggling. It's clear that the woman is being tortured, but we don't know who she is, or why, or how she got here.

The camera angle pulls back and focuses on the woman, now soaking wet, struggling to breathe while two military men bark questions to her in Chinese. The angle pulls back and she's thrown to the ground in an abandoned warehouse, the men continue to interrogate her and she utters a response, indicating that she understands their language. They pull her up off the floor, handcuff her to a chair when suddenly they stop and the camera angle switches to the menacing sounds behind a mysterious wooden door. Close up on the woman – she's terrified. Close-up on the door – it's mysterious. Camera pulls in tighter on terrified woman. Camera pulls in tighter on mysterious door. Back to woman. Back to door. Door opens and...a dusty white-haired humanities professor walks into the library of UCLA. Suddenly we're taken back to the beginning of the terrified woman's story – when everything was normal before she was the terrified woman and then we spend the next hour finding out how she got herself in this predicament.

The blind beggar Bartimaeus, throws off his cloak, jumps to his feet, fights his way through the crowd, and comes to Jesus. It makes a good opening scene. This morning's scripture reading marks the end of the first half of St. Mark's telling of the Jesus story – this first half is set in Galilee. Jesus heals people and calls disciples, and in between times he teaches, often in parables, and raises the ire of the religious authorities. In the second half the scene shifts to Jerusalem. There Jesus faces controversy, his identity is disclosed, and he's led to crucifixion. The story of Bartimaeus is the climax of the first story.

But good storyteller that he is, Mark is ending this chapter of his story by taking us back to the beginning. The story of Bartimaeus is the culmination of Mark's description of Jesus' teaching on discipleship. It looks like *this* – he's telling us.

But the story doesn't make sense by itself. To understand it, we have to go back to a series of gospel vignettes that begin with the healing of another blind man in Mark chapter 8, verse 22. The disciples come to Bethsaida and the people bring him a blind man to touch him. He, being Jesus, then took the blind man and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" And the man looked up and said, "I *can* see people, but they look like trees, walking." So Jesus laid his hands on the man's eyes again; and he looked intently and the man's sight was restored, *then* he saw everything clearly. Then Jesus sent him away to his home, saying, "do not even go into the village."

What's going on here? Jesus spits on a guy's eyes and he partially regains his eyesight, but not quite clearly. Jesus has to touch him again before he sees perfectly. But Jesus tells him not to tell anybody. This is one of the strange things about Mark's gospel – Jesus is always telling people to keep things on the quiet. He doesn't want anyone to make premature or false confessions.

We see the danger posed in premature confessions if we fast-forward to the next scene. Jesus is with his disciples in 8:27 and he asks them, "Who do people say that I am"? What's the opinion poll? Give your best shot at interpreting reality. And they say, well some think you're John the Baptist, others think you're the Elijah who was taken up into the clouds in a chariot of fire and now you've come back. Others say you're one of the prophets. And then Jesus asks them the question of all questions. Who do YOU say that I am?

Peter gives the textbook answer. He says, "You are the Messiah". It's a bold declaration, but Jesus doesn't appear to be impressed. We know this because he again tells them not to say anything to anyone. While he may have stumbled upon the right answer, the following conversation reveals that Peter doesn't know what it means to call Jesus the Messiah. Peter is able to put Jesus in the right category, but he cannot see that Jesus has transfigured the category. Pious Israelites had awaited a Davidic descendent as Messiah – a warrior king who will punish sinners, but Jesus has come to show God's mercy to sinners through the agony of the cross. Peter shows just how far he is from understanding by telling Jesus "you must be mistaken; you're the Messiah and the plans you have don't really conform to my belief system."

Mark presents a variation on this theme is two more times in the next two chapters. In chapter nine verse thirty: Jesus again puts a gag order on the twelve after telling them that he will be crucified, dead and buried, and rise again three days later. The disciples don't know what to make of all this talk about suffering and before long the conversation devolves into an argument about who is the greatest. Jesus tells the twelve that the greatest will be the one who forsakes his greatness and becomes a servant to others.

Their third adventure in missing the point takes place in chapter ten verse thirty-two. Jesus tells the disciples that they are following him to the cross. This time James and John say to him, "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you." Jesus responds, "what do you want me to do for you?" The brothers request places of honor and power– to be seated with Christ in glory. In response, Jesus tells the twelve that the economy of God's kingdom is not based on power and control but on service and sacrifice.

Three predictions of death: Three instances of the disciples jockeying for position and prestige: Three failed lessons in discipleship. The twelve comprehend that Jesus is the Messiah, but they do not see clearly what this means. All of this is Mark's way of showing us that there is a sort of pervasive spiritual blindness at work.

Enter Bartimaeus. On the surface, there's not much difference between Bartimaeus' request for restored sight and James and John's request to be seated at the right and left hand in glory. They both want things that will improve their lot. Mark is a subtle storyteller. Whereas it has been Jesus until this point that has silenced Messianic confession, this time it

is the crowd who seek to silence and keep Bartimaeus from Jesus. But he will not be deterred. This time Jesus' stands in contrast to the crowd – he does not see Bartimaeus as a problem to be dealt with, and he responds to Bartimaeus with the same words he responds to James and John, “what do you want me to do for you?”

The question is the same, but the story turns on the response. The disciples' request reveals their desire to be served; once Bartimaeus has his vision restored, he does not construct elaborate schemes for amassing power and wealth. He does not even go back to pick up his cloak. He simply and immediately “follows Jesus on the way.” *Seeing Jesus clearly means following Jesus without reservation.* Though blind, Bartimaeus is able to see Jesus. The disciples were with Jesus all the time and had had no trouble with their eyesight, yet they could not see the kind of Messiah Jesus is.

What are the things that keep us from seeing Jesus? I want to suggest that the heart of the Bartimaeus story lie in his cloak - It is a simple and seemingly irrelevant detail, but the text tells us, “throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.” This matters because his cloak is the most important thing he has – it's his source of protection from the dust and wind and rain and cold. It's also his source of income, sort of like a street musician's open guitar case. This is the dramatic apex of the story – he has security and he'll need to risk it for the one thing needful. He has a cloak – he wants to *see* – bad enough to part with his cloak. He drops the one thing he has in exchange for the one thing that matters.

Up until this point Mark has woven into his story characters who, unlike Bartimaeus can't see Jesus and so can't bring themselves to drop their cloaks and run to Jesus and have their sight restored; people who cling to other sources of security and look to other things for their identity. People like us.

We often suffer the same blindness when it comes to Jesus. We spend a good deal of our lives trying to organize and arrange things so that we'll never be in Bartimaeus' position. This is what our savings and medical insurance and 401k's are all about. They protect us from the vulnerability brought about by personal, medical, career, or environmental disasters. By and large, these are important and good things. The trouble is it's so easy for these things to become distorted and take on far more space in our hearts and minds than is proper. Managing money, property, or our image can become a full-time occupation and so encumbering that it becomes impossible to spring to our feet and follow Jesus. So when Jesus says, “What do you want me to do for you” our only response is, “Uh...well, if you could adjust interest rates just a percent or two, then I think it would be much easier for me to think about following you.”

Material possessions are not the only cloaks we wear – James and John show us that status can be just as alluring. What is status, and why do we long for it anyway? The quest for status names our deep-seated insecurity that our lives won't be meaningful or remembered. I have a regular conversation every year with our high school juniors and seniors who feel that if they don't get into their top tier choice of schools that their futures are going to be imperiled. If we allow ourselves to drop the cloak of status and Jesus asks us, “What do you want me to do for you,” what will we say? Something like, “Make me important so I don't have to face the possibility of not living up to the expectations that I have set for myself or that others have thrust upon me”.

A church wears its own kind of cloaks. Often it is the cloak of institutional maintenance. It doesn't matter whether it takes the form of an imbalanced attention to finances, to buildings and grounds, to programs that have been successful, to a particular liturgical style, or traditions that are fiercely guarded – if we refuse to ask the hard questions about our ministry and decide at the end of the day that we like things just the way they are or the way they were 50 years ago then we've built up a pretty impressive cloak. It may even be impressive enough to conceal illness. It's less risky to stay on the road and keep things the way they are than it is to throw off the cloak of institutional maintenance and follow Jesus. But where does that get us when Jesus wants to ask us “What do you want me to do for you?” If we don't risk getting up to follow, we never get to hear the question.

Lest we get too pious and think that the cloaks we wear are some kind of material thing, let's not forget that there are plenty of religious cloaks. I have been fascinated by the controversy that has swirled around the publication of Rob Bell's latest book. Bell is the popular 40 something minister of Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His book is called *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. Immediately the book has ignited a firestorm of accusations and prompted charges of heresy. Now I admit, I haven't read the book. It's on my shelf and I haven't gotten to it. But the peculiar thing is, neither had any of the people who had launched the accusations. The charges of heresy began before the book was released for review and were apparently based solely on the title of the book and a two minute blurb on the publisher's website. Sometimes our certainty; our religious orthodoxy and righteousness can become our cloak. So when Jesus says, “What do you want me to do for you?” we sound like Peter, “I sure hope you conform to my belief system.” Imagine what would happen if he didn't?

We're all blind in different ways and face different temptations and challenges. But there's one cloak that I think we all wear. It's the tendency to think of the Christian faith as a sort of insurance policy: something that doesn't require a whole lot from us in our lifetime other than a verbal assent and a deduction or two from our bank account, but in the end covers our bases for eternal life. Pascal's Wager. We adjust it accordingly when we are confronted with grief, but otherwise the cloak of faith just gets stored in our mental closet – seen and dusted off a couple of hours each week, but not really noticed or thought about most of the time. So when Jesus asks us, “What do you want me to do for you?” we say “I want to sign up for the eternal life deal, do I talk to you?”

If you recognize yourself in any of these descriptions, the story of Bartimaeus has one thing to say for us. In order to gain our sight, we're going to have to drop our cloaks. Making these cloaks is the most natural thing to do. But if we want to see Jesus face to face, it's time to drop the cloak - to part with the insulation. The rich young ruler wouldn't part with his money – that was his. James and John wouldn't give up their hope for greatness – that was theirs. The Pharisees wouldn't give up their traditions.

We need to drop our cloak because God dropped *his* cloak, when he when he emptied himself and came among us in a manger in Bethlehem. When he hung broken on a cross in Jerusalem. He cast aside all that separated himself from us because he wants so desperately to love us. We need to drop our cloaks because Jesus wants to ask us, “what do you want me to do for you?” and if we're encumbered by all of the things that keep us from

coming to him, we will never really see him.

It is so difficult to drop our cloaks. We can become accustomed to blindness. Think about what that must have been like for Bartimaeus – he is asking for a change of his entire identity - to step into a whole new way of being. It's terrifying. Sometimes we feel like we're never going to find the courage to cast off the things that entangle us.

But all is not lost. As we come to the end of the story of how this blind man gained his sight, we hear echoes of Mark's first story of the healing of a blind man. In the disciples' eagerness to pronounce Jesus the messiah, they rush to conclusions about what their discipleship entails. They are like the man whom Jesus touches, but who does not see clearly at first. Mark draws us back and places these stories together to offer a word of hope that *our* lingering blindness might also be relieved by the continuing touch of Jesus. Draw close to Jesus, he tells us and you will find the courage to cast aside your distractions. He is present for those who want to see.

Amen.